

Alaska Natural History Association—an important partner for the Kenai Refuge

by Brenda Nichol

What is the first thing you see when you walk into the Visitor Center at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge on Ski Hill Road? If you said a book or gift store, you would be right. If you think the store is owned and operated by the refuge, you would only be partly right. It is operated by the refuge staff in the Visitor Center, but bookstore is actually owned by the Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA).

You might ask, “Who or what is this organization called ANHA?” Well, ANHA is a non-profit organization dedicated to sharing Alaska’s natural and cultural heritage through education. ANHA is also “a bookstore, an educator, and a supporter of public land educational programs.” The organization works with federal and state land management agencies all around Alaska.

Originally founded in the 1950s as the Mount McKinley National Park Association, the organization was initially run by National Park Service employees. Eventually, the name was changed to Alaska National Parks and Monuments Association in order to include other national parks in Alaska.

Soon, other federal land agencies in Alaska wanted to be included in the organization to provide similar services for their visitors. So, in 1978, the Alaska Natural History Association was created, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed on as one of several partner agencies. Today ANHA has 35 branches and 50 sales outlets in the state. The Kenai Refuge is just one of their many branches.

Our ANHA bookstore opened for business in 1980 and has been serving the community and visitors for 25 years. We have two sales outlets; the main outlet is at the refuge headquarters (Visitor Center) in Soldotna. During the summer, we also have an outlet at the Visitor Contact Station, near Jim’s Landing on the Sterling Highway. Furthermore, at Hidden Lake and Upper Skilak Lake Campgrounds, the volunteer camp hosts sell firewood between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and these sales too are also part of ANHA.

While the sales outlets are quite visible, there are some aspects about ANHA that may not be so obvious,

such as where the sales money goes. Since the Alaska Natural History Association is a non-profit organization, what happens to the proceeds from the sales? When you buy something in most retail stores, your money goes into the company’s pocket.

When you shop at an ANHA store, your money comes back to you, at least in part. How does that happen? Well, it’s not as obvious as getting cash back at the end of the sale. Let’s say you come into the refuge to get information on cross country skiing. While you are here, you purchase the “Kenai Trails” book for yourself, a unique leather bookmark, and a “Taste of Alaska” chocolate bar. Before leaving, you also pick up the Reflections Visitor Guide and a Bear Facts brochure. Perhaps you found out about upcoming winter events because your children got some “freebies” and won a door prize at the refuge’s new Environmental Education Center Dedication event last month. So where is the reward for shopping here?

Part of the reward is the free publications you picked up. In 2005, ANHA gave back \$3900 to the refuge to develop and print our free “Reflections Visitor Guide” for the refuge. They also participated in publishing the “Bear Facts” brochure. In 2003 ANHA contributed \$10,000 in matching funds for media equipment and education materials for the new Environmental Education Center. Remember the door prize and “freebies” your kids took home? Those items were donated by ANHA. These kinds of rewards for shopping at an ANHA bookstore contribute to your education and enjoyment of the Refuge and Alaska.

While most of the money and items contributed by ANHA are used for education, others are not. The federal government is not allowed to use its funds for certain things, such as providing food and guest speakers at special events. ANHA allows the refuge to provide these special events and allows us to show appreciation to our refuge volunteers through gifts and awards.

These same services are also provided to other refuges, and other land management agencies partnered by the Alaska Natural History Association. Throughout the state, ANHA contributes over 1.2 mil-

lion dollars to it branches and agency partners.

A portion of every dollar spent at an ANHA branch comes back to that specific branch or agency. So remember, the next time you visit the refuge and spend your hard earned money at one of our sales outlets, some of that money is going to come back to you, one way or another. Whether it is a free visitor's guide, a door prize, or a hot dog, the Alaska Natural History Association is creating a special experience for you and your family at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

You can find information about the Alaska Natural

History Association on the web: www.alaskanha.org, call (907) 274-8440, or ask one of the employees or volunteers who greet you the next time you visit the refuge.

Brenda Nichol lives in Soldotna with her husband, Randy and their children. She began working for the refuge in 1989 and has been supporting the refuge's ANHA operations as the Assistant Branch Manager for the past 16 years. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.